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**Regina Smith:** Our future as a species is completely dependent on us learning to radically collaborate. And in order for us to do that, we have to be able to have a language and a framework to talk about the power differentials that are present.

**Sam Fuqua:** That's Regina Smith, and this is, Well, That Went Sideways! A podcast that serves as a resource to help people have healthy and respectful communication. We present ideas, tools, and techniques to help you transform conflict in relationships of all kinds. This episode features Regina Smith and Amanda Aguilera on power structures, race and conflict. Both are on the staff of Naropa University, a Buddhist inspired University in Boulder, Colorado. Regina Smith is Executive Director of Mission Integration and Student Affairs. Amanda Aguilera is Associate Director of Conflict Resolution and Inclusive Community. And together they have a consulting firm called Evolving Dynamics. And I wanna welcome you both to the program. Thank you for joining us.

**Amanda Aguilera:** Thanks for having us.

**Sam Fuqua:** Also welcome, uh, my co-host, Jes Rau. Hi Jes.

**Jes Rau:** Hey there.

**Sam Fuqua:** Amanda Aguilera, could you explain an organization you've been a part of for several years called, The Right Use of Power Institute, uh, what the foundations of that work are? And that might be a good way to lead into our discussion.

**Amanda Aguilera:** Sure. So, The Right Use of Power Institute is the work of, uh, based on the work of Dr. Cedar Barstow, who, uh, has been teaching power dynamics for the past few decades. Particularly, she started in the realm of the helping profession. So, training therapists and things, how to use, be cognizant of power dynamics and use the power wisely and well. And that, that, uh, curriculum has developed over time. And, I helped to establish that, uh, nonprofit, the Institute, um, many years ago now. And essentially, the, the beautiful thing about “Right Use of Power” is that it gi, it offers a common language and framework for understanding power, um, in its many manifestations, uh, both intrapersonally and interpersonally. And Regina and I have continued to develop that work into the realm of status power. So really looking at, uh, the dynamics of power among people with culturally conferred privilege or power. So, um, and in, in addition to that, collective and systemic power. So it really is, um, an amazing framework that uses clear language but also embodied experiential, so that you can really get to know power within yourself.

**Sam Fuqua:** How do you break it down? There are different types of power, right?

**Amanda Aguilera:** Yes, that, several different types of power. So, personal power is the power that everyone is born with. So, we say that no matter who you are or where you are born, uh, or how you, what body you are born into, everyone has personal power and it's really just your individual ability to have an effect or influence. So, that is something that is really important for,

for people to understand because it automatically discounts the notion that some people have power and some people don't, right? Everyone has power. So, when we, when we talk about, well, I feel powerless in this situation, we actually do have power no matter if we recognize it, or other people recognize it, or not. So, developing that personal power is really key to using “Right Use of Power” well.

The second type of power is role power. So role power is an, in addition to personal power, uh, it is, uh, it is power that is awarded, assigned, elected. Uh, it is position of power essentially. So if I am a teacher, then I have role power in relationship to my students, for example. Uh, that status power, uh, uh, sorry, role power, is in addition to personal power. Similarly, status power is in addition to personal power, but status power is culturally conferred. So, it is the power that is given by essentially, whoever's holding the systemic power in place. And in our culture, that means, uh, white people. That means men or people who identify as male. Uh, people who identify as cisgender, et cetera. So, uh, status power, role power and personal power can all be happening simultaneously in the interpersonal experience. And you hear my four year old laughing in the background though.

Um, so, uh, and then the other two types of power, um, are really, uh, group dynamic power. So collective power is when individuals use their personal role and status power collectively to have a larger impact or influence. So we see that in movements like Black Lives Matter, for example. We also see that in movements like the Ku Klux Klan, right? So, power is a neutral thing that can be used in a lot of different ways that have very positive or very negative impacts. Uh, and then finally, systemic power is the power that is, uh, held by the people who have the most role and status power. And it tends to be iterative. So, it tends to maintain its power, and it's also in charge of setting the norms, policies, uh, rules, professional standards, things like that, that shape how, not only how we think, but how we're allowed to interact, um, in order to feel included or in order to belong, for instance. So that is just a quick, uh, rundown of the, of the types of power.

**Jes Rau:** I was wondering, as you were talking, I was wondering about the, um, examples. So, examples of personal power that we're seeing quite a bit in the media and online with people, um, quickly taking out video cameras to record things that are going on when folks are, um, in conflict or, or experiencing, um, different types of oppression. Uh, what are some other examples that folks might be familiar with of these types of powers, uh, in play?

**Regina Smith:** You used a great example of people's personal power of how they're choosing to engage. Or they could also be under using their power by not choosing to engage or choosing to disengage. And so folks who are showing up to protests and to the movements and even folks who are, um, you know, putting particular links or sharing things on social media, um, sharing resources about how one can educate oneself right now are all using, you know, personal power. And then at organizations, I think there are a lot of folks who are choosing to, um, lead their organizations in ways that will re-energize and revisit how they are creating diverse and inclusive workplaces for their employees or for their coworkers, and that would be an example of role power. We've already talked about the fact that the Black Lives Matter movement overall is an example of collective power. Um, and then if you look at, um, things that are maybe a little less positive, in my view, like unidentified federal agents picking up protestors and putting them into unmarked vans, that's an example also of collective power and systemic power. Because going

back to Amanda's point or the point of “Right Use of Power” is that power is neutral, and so it's not always going to lead society in the way that we might want collective power to be used depending on the bodies that we're in and the seats that we sit in. Um, but those are examples of all of the power that we're seeing right now.

And then, of course, depending on what body you're in and whether or not it's an identity that our, uh, culture has given power to, that will determine whether you're in an up, um, status or down status. So, you know, in this culture, black people have been historically oppressed for hundreds of years, so we're in a down power status. But I would argue that folks who have experienced and had to navigate systems of oppression have actually cultivated quite a, a large amount, I don't know if it's quantifiable in that way, but tend to have a lot of personal power because they've had to overcome obstacles. They've had to navigate and find ways to get around barriers in order to have the same access to opportunities, even though, um, institutions have been, um, systemically organized to keep them from accessing power. So they've really had to compensate through developing characteristics and qualities and skills that tend to give them a lot of personal power. So I think the relationships between these types of power are also quite complex.

**Jes Rau:** Something that's, at least for me when I think about the field of conflict resolution in general, when we say, um, conflict resolution or conflict management, that so often we don't think about power in the dynamics, whether it's, uh, individual, like a interpersonal conflict between two people or, um, a workplace conflict or societal conflicts, uh, that power gets missed in that conversation really often. Um, I'm wondering if you all have seen that? If, if you feel like there's that void as well, and if so, what, what might we do about that?

**Amanda Aguilera:** Absolutely. Um, I, I would like to respond to that and then Regina, if you want to jump in. Um, just in my work in conflict resolution and restorative practices, um, absolutely it gets missed. And um, it actually, when we miss talking about that explicitly, we're actually continuing to perpetuate these systems of oppression because we're not, um, talking about the really fundamental thing that impacts the interpersonal relationship. It's like, you know, it's always there. It's like the invisible thing that has so much impact in how we're showing up, um, in ourselves and with each other. Um, so when I do restorative conversations or, or facilitate restorative processes, I will actually name the, uh, power dynamics in the room. You know, I will say, you know, who has down power and up power, and the complexity of that. And I might even in the, in the conversation itself, uh, point out like, oh, this is, um, I'm seeing this dynamic here, um, let's pause and talk about this power dynamic because, um, a lot of times it's that very power dynamic that caused the conflict in the first place.

**Regina Smith:** Yeah, I, I think I would respond to your question by saying, I guess the, it's, it begs the question of like, well, who's doing the missing if power dynamics often get missed? I think they get missed by folks who in those contexts are in up power. Because as a woman of color, I don't think I'm in any interactions where I'm not thinking about status power, where I'm not thinking about race, where I'm not thinking about gender. Um, so if it's getting missed, it's likely getting missed by someone who has the privilege and can afford to miss the, the power dynamics. Because if I miss them, uh, that can be a very dangerous, uh, moment for me. So, I think it, it really is about who's doing the missing.

**Jes Rau:** Yeah. Thank you. And I definitely agree with that. I was, um, thinking about the, just the overall field of conflict resolution is so steeped in that kind of whiteness and white ideology that, that, that is absolutely at the root of why it's missed, in general.

**Sam Fuqua:** So whose responsibility is it to, um, to make sure it's not missed?

**Amanda Aguilera:** Well, it is everyone's responsibility, but in “Right Use of Power,” we, there is something called the 150 percent principle, which means that those who have role and or status power, um, have additional responsibility because we have additional, uh, uh, resources, and the person in down power has additional vulnerabilities. So basically, the theory is that everyone shows up a hundred percent. So, everyone is responsible for the interpersonal dynamics, but those with, with additional role in status power, have additional responsibility because of that. So, we say that those people have 150 percent responsibility. Um, so yeah, if, if you are a facilitator, for example, you have more responsibility. If you are a white person amongst people of color and you see something problematic or you see power dynamics that are causing harm, it is 150 percent that person's responsibility.

**Sam Fuqua:** Do either of you have a, uh, an example from your work that would help illustrate how that plays out in a, in a real life conflict, in a real life, uh, situation where you have gone in perhaps as facilitators?

**Amanda Aguilera:** I mean, it can be something as common as, for example, all the white men in the room talking, and, uh, the people with marginalized identities, not having space to talk. Or when they do talk, they're not listened to or they are shut down, for example. So, if I am sitting in that room as a white person, um, I can notice that, wow, all the white men are talking and we haven't heard at all from the people of color in the room. So I may just say, I might just notice that out loud, right? I might just say that explicitly, um, and just let it be there in the room, right? Whether I invite someone to speak is de, dependent on the people in the room. Often if I invite people, I can put someone on the spot. So, I often instead just notice explicitly the dynamic.

**Regina Smith:** And I would say, um, our work currently has a lot to do with helping folks to disrupt "us versus them" thinking to look at how, um, everyone's being im, impacted by systemic racism. To look at how our future as a species is completely dependent on us learning to radically collaborate. Um, and in order for us to do that, we have to be able to have a language and a framework to talk about the power differentials that are present. We have to have a language and a framework to look at how historically, barriers have been erected between different groups of people, um, based on, you know, distrust and mistrust. And so, a lot of our work is first getting people to come to the table and recognize why we all have a stake in learning to have these conversations, and then giving people tools to have these conversations, and really framing this work in terms of community, in terms of wanting folks to feel more comfortable with one another. Um, so those are some of the things that we bring to organizations and to conversations is how do we, through mindfulness and compassion, um, how do we have the courage to kind of face these power dynamics to begin with and to engage in that way? Um, so that's some of the work that we do that builds the foundation for being able to, to, to engage in conflict.

Um, Amanda is, can very beautifully describe how just the presence of difference, uh, means that there is going to be conflict. And so, we really need to be able to lean into conflict as inevitable, as an, an inevitable part of collaboration. Um, an inevitable part of us being on the same page so that we can work more effectively together. And I think a lot of folks are conflict avoidant. They avoid talking about power. They avoid talking about our different embodiment, our different lived experiences, because they're afraid they're gonna say the wrong thing. They're afraid they're gonna offend someone. They're afraid that the emotions that are gonna come into the room are gonna be overwhelming. And so really, a lot of this work is about orienting people toward the fact that we actually have the skills and capacity to do this work and that it is something that you can learn. Um, so, that's I think, another aspect of the work that we're doing together.

**Sam Fuqua:** Naropa is a Buddhist inspired institution, and when you work with entities outside of Naropa, uh, how do they react or do they take an additional level of, uh, education around concepts like mindfulness?

**Regina Smith:** Well, I think mindfulness is becoming more and more, uh, mainstream, so to speak. I mean, it's all over magazines. There's lots of mainstream or more corporate organizations that also have mindfulness at work programs. So it's not as unusual as it might have been ten years ago to talk about mindfulness. Most, most organizations do have, um, some grasp of what that means and, and really, it's just awareness. And so, there's a lot of ways to bring self-reflexiveness, self-reflection and awareness into, um, the basic structure of your day-to-day operations. Um, so, I don't think it's as unusual as it used to be.

**Amanda Aguilera:** Yeah, and just to, to jump in there, I think mindfulness is, is a part of personal power too. So, part of how we frame it is if you are wanting to develop your personal power, which increases your efficacy across the board, you know, it only helps you, but it can also help others. When you develop your personal power to, for example, not only be mindful, but also be able to self-regulate, right? There's a lot of fear that comes up in conversations, for example, on risk. And so, learning how to, especially for people with privilege or, or status power, being able to be mindful and being able to self-regulate, to stay engaged in the conversation, is really critical. Um, it also helps in many other areas of life. So, just wanted to add that piece as well.

**Jes Rau:** Yeah, as you were, um, talking, I was wondering about, uh, what are the hardest parts? Like what is, so the fear is one piece that's kind of a hard hurdle for folks to get over. Um, when thinking about conflict and thinking about, talking about especially, um, topics of race or other power, um, and systemic issues, what are some of the other sticking points that you notice where people just really struggle to relate to, um, power and how that shows up in conflict?

**Regina Smith:** I have exper, experienced that, um, people are afraid of, of being bad people. Like everyone wants to see themselves as a good person, and there's a fear that if they face the, uh, their socialized minds, the internalized racism, the internalized sexism, the internalized homophobia, that that means that they're a bad person. And so, because folks are so attached to needing to be good and to see themselves as good and to seeing those things as bad, so thinking in this very dualistic way, it's very hard for people to turn towards just looking, just examining, just being honest with how they've been impacted by our culture. I would also say something that I think is difficult is to see how white supremacy culture is a part of, it's embedded

in everything that we do. It's embedded in our cultural norms. It's embedded in the way we, what we consider professional. It's embedded in what we consider productive. It's embedded in what we think is good communication, the right tone of voice, the right clothes to wear. And so really, uh, to be able to turn toward that and look at that and name it as, uh, not what is normal, but what is a part of a particular cultural value can also be really difficult for people to, um, examine and to be willing to have those conversations and pot, potentially change the way that things are done.

**Amanda Aguilera:** Fragility, uh, also comes up, which, you know, white fragility, which was coined by Robin DiAngelo. You know, I would say there's up power fragility that, that just shows up, which is really just that lack of development of personal power that Regina was talking about earlier. Yeah so, that is another thing that is, can be really challenging to, to work with in the room. Um, everyone wants to be acknowledged for their, them as a person, you know, and seen as a person. Um, but when we only talk about the individual, uh, then we miss the systemic pieces that are so critical to bring into the room, uh, because they have such a profound impact, uh, in continuing to harm and oppress a lot of people.

**Sam Fuqua:** Amanda, can you say again what, what you mean by white fragility?

**Amanda Aguilera:** Yeah, so white fragility comes from Robin DiAngelo, and, uh, fragility just means that, uh, when confronted with, um, power dynamics, uh, or for example, let me give you an example. So let's say that, uh, okay, I am a white, liberal woman, uh, who does this for a living, right? I study power dynamics and I teach it. Uh, so if in my mind I consider myself to not be racist, right? Then, if someone gives me feedback that I impacted them negatively or harmed them by something racist that I did or said, then likely because of the cognitive dissonance between me viewing myself as not racist and a good white person, and the person who was harmed, I'm likely to dismiss or be offended or cry. Um, and so then the ex, the whole interaction gets centered on me, a white person or a person who holds the status power, instead of on the impacted person. So white fragility, um, is really pointing to the inability to stay focused on the actual impact, um, and the tendency to, uh, bring in my intention to justify to, um, to turn the tables and blame you for being angry, uh, to blame you for, right, um, just bringing up anything that could reflect negatively on me, right? So, it is, um, it is a, it when, in terms of conflict resolution, it becomes very challenging because we've now gotten off the actual impact into centering whiteness.

**Regina Smith:** And I'll just add to that by saying that, you know, uh, DiAngelo defines fragility as a lack of psychosocial stamina. That, you know, whatever areas in which we have power and up power and haven't had to examine our experience, we haven't had practice in engaging across difference. We haven't had the practice of having, in the case of whiteness, white folks haven't had the practice of having to look at their life through the lens of race and having to engage in conversation about race and having to do that work. So, they haven't worked those muscles. And so, when the situations come where there is this tension and this conflict that's because of the power differential indifference, they lack, uh, a certain capacity depending on how much practice they have or had not had in, uh, regulating their nervous system, and being able to hear the impact, and not focus on the intention, and all of the things that Amanda says. So, it is actually something that, uh, can be unlearned. It is something that with practice one can become, if you

wanna use the term fragility, less fragile. Um, but I also think that we need to look at, or one of our colleagues and mentors in this work, Dr. Carla Sherrell has mentioned before, that maybe it's not quite fragility. Um, and I think there is more cultural critique coming out about the use of the word fragility to describe this lack of stamina because it doesn't necessarily get at what can sometimes become quite aggressive and violent, uh, when whiteness is allowed to be recentered and to take certain conversations off the table altogether, so as not to disrupt the status quo.

**Sam Fuqua:** So, it may not be fragility, it may be more, uh, defensiveness?

**Regina Smith:** Yeah, I mean, defensiveness is one of the ways that, uh, they say fragility shows up. I'm not really sure what other folks might call it. I would probably call it a lack of capacity, um, or an underdevelopment in a particular area or in a particular skillset.

**Jes Rau:** So, as you're talking about that, I was thinking about how often we're doing this work as adults, um, coming to these understandings, figuring out that there are things we need to work on, um, our areas of fragility or how we show up, uh, with our power. Are there folks that you know of or are you all doing anything around, uh, working with younger people or children around these issues so that they don't get all the way to adulthood having to unlearn and unpack all of these things?

**Regina Smith:** Yeah, I mean, recently I referred, uh, Amanda and I are both parents and we send our children to the same preschool that's affiliated with Naropa called Alaya Preschool. Recently, they reached out to me to do some consulting in this area and I actually referred them to my colleague, uh, Dr. Jamila Ajanku-Willie, who does a lot of work around parenting and educating educators, um, and also, I believe she also does work with children. Um, I don't personally do work with children. I'm not sure if Amanda has additional resources in that area, uh, other than my own struggles as a parent, but that's different.

**Amanda Aguilera:** Yeah. Same for me. Uh, we are both parents of biracial kids. Um, so the, the, the journey there and being a single parent too, the journey there is just individual for me. I do not currently consult around kids, but I think it is where we should be starting. Certainly is working with parents and kids, not just the kids.

**Regina Smith:** I mean, I think one of the things that's important about the way that Amanda and I view the work, uh, one is that we do this work with each other all the time. So, everything that we have to offer, we also have learned through, uh, working with our various identities and the power differentials and dual relationships that we hold, but also that we, we really see this work in terms of connection. That, you know, it's really about looking at the ways in which, uh, our misunderstandings of identity and our misunderstandings of, uh, power get in, um, and our misuses of power get in the way of us feeling truly connected and, and in, and us using our power to help those who are down power to feel like they have a place of belonging, to feel like they are cared for. And so I think it's just really helpful for folks to start to look at cultivating their capacity and cultivating their ability to be in discomfort, cultivating their ability to be in conflict as, as part of the journey toward becoming a more, uh, connected community, a more connected society, so that we can start to really work together, um, to, you know, well, for one, save our

planet, you know, to, to do the things that matter and that we need to do in order to survive as a species.

**Amanda Aguilera:** And I would just add that, uh, these are things that you can learn, you know, and practice. So, I think I find a lot of hopelessness and, uh, helplessness. I hear a lot of that right now, and I just want to say that, yeah, you have personal power and we have collective power, and we can use that. Um, and we, Regina and I are available to help. We have a website, it's called evolving-dynamics.com, and uh, you're welcome to, to reach out, uh, to us if you have any questions.

**Sam Fuqua:** Well, thank you both, uh, Amanda Aguilera and Regina Smith. It's been great to talk with you. Thank you for your time and for your work.

**Regina Smith:** Thank you for having us.

**Amanda Aguilera:** Thanks, Sam, and thanks, Jes.

**Sam Fuqua:** Amanda Aguilera is Associate Director of Conflict Resolution and Inclusive Community at Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado. Regina Smith is Executive Director of Mission Integration and Student Affairs at Naropa. Together they have a consulting firm called Evolving Dynamics.

Our podcast is called, Well, That Went Sideways! We produce new episodes twice a month and you can find them wherever you get your podcasts, and on our website, sidewayspod.org. We also have information on our guests and links to more conflict resolution resources at the website. That's sidewayspod.org. Our program is produced by Mary Zinn, Jes Rau, and me, Sam Fuqua. Our theme music is by Mike Stewart. And this podcast is a partnership with The Conflict Center, a Denver-based nonprofit that provides practical skills and training for addressing everyday conflicts. Find out more at conflictcenter.org.